

**“Is This Iowa?”**

**Final Sermon: Strange Times and Dangerous Times:**

**The Book of Revelation for Today Sermon Series**

**Revelation 21**

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Eleven months from now, cars will be streaming from Chicago to a little baseball field carved out of a cornfield in Iowa. Major League Baseball announced last month that next August the Chicago White Sox and the New York Yankees will play a game at the Field of Dreams...or, more correctly, the field of dreams field.

I wonder if the players will ask to take the field by walking through the corn....

You may remember the movie *Field of Dreams*, based on the book *Shoeless Joe* by W. P. Kinsella. It's hard to believe, but that movie celebrated its 30th anniversary this past spring.

Do you remember the classic line? Shoeless Joe Jackson and, eventually, the other long-dead former White Sox players disgraced in the 1919 Black Sox gambling scandal come out to play on the baseball field that Ray Kinsella builds on his farm in Iowa.

After playing on the field for the first time, Shoeless Joe turns to Ray....the only one who can see him at that point...and asks him....Is this heaven? And Ray answers, “No, this is Iowa.”

The members of that disgraced Chicago team think the field is heaven, because they are getting to play again...something they were banned from doing for life. Gone is the pressure of winning, the temptation to make a buck on the side, gone is anything but the sheer joy of playing the game. For them, that's what heaven means.

Fred Rogers once suggested that “The connections we make in the course of a life—maybe that's what heaven is.”

Colton Burpo was 3 years old when he had a near death experience. According to his parents, when he awoke, he had a clear vision of what heaven was like because he went there. The extraordinarily popular book and movie now ten years back....*Heaven is Real*, was his father's recounting of Colton's vision.

C.S. Lewis, the great author and accidental theologian, suggested while reflecting on his wife's death in *The Problem with Pain*, that for him, heaven is the place where... "Beyond all possibility of doubt you would say "Here at last is the thing I was made for". We cannot tell each other about it. It is the secret signature of each soul, the incommunicable and unappeasable want, the thing we desired before we met our wives or made our friends or chose our work, and which we shall still desire on our deathbeds, when the mind no longer knows wife or friend or work. While we are, this is."

Today, John of Patmos joins in this endless chorus of speculation, reflection, dreaming that is humanity's attempt to answer the question "What happens after?" After what you ask, after everything...

John is imagining the New Jerusalem as the meeting place of the New Heaven and the New Earth...all of the things that were once separated between the earthly kingdom and the heavenly kingdom are gone...

The City that John imagines is not of his own making...he is actually re-imagining the city that was first described in both Ezekiel and, to a lesser degree, in Daniel in the Old Testament. These were visions of a rebuilt Jerusalem by those who were living in exile....and John reimagines those visions...as the ultimate homecoming for the all the people of God...

That city in Ezekiel had 12 gates as well...that city, like this one, has a figurative size....the literal size of the city that John describes is well...bizarre...it is 1500 miles long, 1500 miles wide and 1500 miles high in the NRSV, but what that misses is the other number I read....12,000 stadia....12...the magical number of this story...times 1000....And the wall around it, 144 cubits is only about 20 stories high...higher than anything they had...but mostly important because it was 12 times 12... We are to hear those numbers and think....it was big...and it was holy...

John's vision of his eternal home was what his tradition had always longed for...what he had been taught was the ultimate good for the community he called home...John's New Jerusalem is the fulfillment of God's

promises of over 1000 years for John, over 3000 years for us...It is not a political restoration of Jerusalem, but a spiritual one...all the promise of what could have been...if we had been able to live as though all of God's promises were true all along...

And what are its main characteristics? Death itself is dead, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah...death and sin have been thrown into the pit...

And did you notice....the sea is no more....Let's think about that one for a second. From the moment of creation the seas have been there...the waters over which the spirit moved in creation...but also the most potent Biblical symbol of chaos throughout the people's lives in all of scripture...The sea is no more...the source of chaos is no more....

And who is there...the righteous of course...but it says the gates are always open..and it says the kingdoms of the earth will come...but wait a minute...I though the kingdoms of the earth were fed to the birds last week...and the unfaithful of those folks were tossed into the burning fire...how can they be in two places at once?

New Testament scholar and seminary president Brian Blount suggests we look at the sins that are mentioned as being tossed into the lake...the cowards..."the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars"...Blount says in the context of John, these are not simply sinners, but those who sold others and themselves out to Rome—those who compromised with...who chose Rome's power over God's...but what are we to think when the very people who were killed last week are inside the gates today...I don't know...but what if it means what is burning in the lake...is the cowardice...the broken promises, the murderous plans and actions...what if what is burning is the sin itself...and not the sinners? I don't know...it's all shrouded in mystery...but that does seem to make some sense...

For John...the life that is to come...is a place where our greatest dreams...are finally fulfilled...not for ourselves...but for the world in which we live...the communities we are a part of...and it is a place where death and all of our failings have fallen away...

Not too long ago, I asked a few friends on email and then on a couple of private Facebook groups I'm on what their greatest hope was for the

communities in which they find themselves...but I didn't mention anything about heaven or the New Jerusalem...here is what they said....

1. Freedom from fear;
2. That each person would see the intrinsic worth of every other person;
3. That each of us would live in complete empathy with one another;
4. That our families would once again bloom into the communities of love and interest in one another instead of just ourselves...where compassion, tolerance and understanding would define our relationships;
5. That we could retain our senses of humor and resilience and innocence;
6. That we could share our resources;
7. That we could live abundant lives;
8. That divisions would fall away, and we could live in unity;
9. That our relationships with everyone would be examples of mercy and kindness;
10. Civility and respect;
11. That the poor are housed and fed...and none experience shame;
12. Peace, life and hope.

I don't know about you....but those sound like heaven to me...those sound like a place where God's promises are manifest...

But what does this idea of heaven mean for us? What are our hopes and dreams for the world...what is the greatest thing you can wish, not for yourself, but for the world?

Now...imagine for a moment...imagine that hope, that dream coming true...Whether it's peace, or an end to violence like what we saw in Midland and Odessa, Texas yesterday...what if it's equality of opportunity....or that all would know they are loved....imagine for a moment that it has come true....

THAT is heaven, I think...and I think that is John's point...it's not simply that death is dead and chaos is gone....it's that hope, dreams, love...these live...live fully, live forever...and in the fulfillment of our communal dreams...our individual dreams come along as well....

Remember *Field of Dreams* again? One of the main stories that develops as more and more players appear on the field is the story of Moonlight Graham...a baseball prodigy who could have had an incredible career on the

baseball field, but gave it up to become a small town doctor...taking care of generations of a little town...but he always wondered...what if...what if...and so he is given the chance in the story....to be young and hopeful Moonlight Graham again...to take to the field with all of those great players and prove he could be just as great...but a little girl, Kinsella's daughter, begins to choke on some food...and the young man, flush from the joy of playing ball with his heroes and gaining their respect, leaves the field...and learns that Doc Graham, not Moonlight Graham, was his greatest life...his greatest hope...He learns that he was living his heaven all along...

And that, I think, is our challenge as well...not simply to dream of the tomorrow that can be...but to live as though those hopes we have are true...to strive to make them reality at least so far as we can....to believe that they can be...not to wait for compassion to bloom in eternity, but show it now...not to wish for God to grant us unity at the great table...but to find it today...No, we won't get it right, not all of the time or perhaps even most of the time...yes, we will need God to burn away those parts of us that continue to compromise with evil, those parts that remain captive to fear...but we can have moments in our loving care of one another, and for the stranger and for this beautiful world that God had given us. We can live those New Jerusalem moments each day we can find them....every day we can summon up the courage and the grace...one day at a time....until in God's good time...and by God's grace....they never end...Amen.